

A Great American of the Cloth

A Review by the REV. FRANCIS P. DUFFY.

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THE LIFE OF CARDINAL GIBBONS, Archbishop of Baltimore. By Allen Sinclair Will. E. P. Dutton & Co.

CARDINAL GIBBONS displayed an admirable foresight in most things during his life, but never more so than in his choice of a biographer. Cardinal Gibbons was a great American, an American statesman in fact, and it is proper that his life should be written by a layman, so that the sides of his character and phases of his life which were not confined to his ecclesiastical activities should be properly presented to posterity. Mr. Will is a Catholic man of letters, a Baltimorean, a friend and admirer of Cardinal Gibbons for many years. During the latter portion of the Cardinal's life he gave him the advantage of many intimate chats and also access to documents, through both of which means Mr. Will was given unusual advantages as a biographer.

The career of Cardinal Gibbons spans the period that saw the creation of a new national Catholic church—the Catholic church of the United States. He was ordained at the beginning of the civil war, which marks the end of the anti-foreign, anti-Catholic know-nothing movement. It was German and Irish foreigners, in large part Catholic, who supplied the man power that enabled the North to win the war and afterward supplied the nation with men who helped develop the West and found the great works of transport and industry. Cardinal Gibbons lived through all that period of development that lasted until the end of the world war, the beginning of a new period for mankind, when an aged man might well be satisfied to leave the reins of government in younger hands.

The interest of this book lies in observing how under the leadership of men like Gibbons the Catholic ethos was preserved in all its essentials, while at the same time its foreign aspects are modified to suit the American spirit. Theories, practices, political ideals, racial customs, loyalties, which were racy of the soil in Germany or Italy, Ireland or France, had to make way in this new republic for developments congenial to the character of its national life.

This was the work in which Gibbons stood out as the most conspicuous leader. It would be easy to select from this biography many pages to prove his work as a parish priest or Catholic Bishop or Roman Cardinal, things done within the fold and without any special reference to affairs national. But he will always be best remembered in state and church as the mouthpiece and leader of the determined and victorious army of Catholics in this country who have made up their minds that their church must be not foreign, but American; that it would not be an outpost for foreign penetration into this country, but rather an outpost for the penetration of American ideals into the church universal.

II.

Nobody pretends that Cardinal Gibbons achieved this alone, nor even that he or any other one man was the chief factor in the doing of it. It was determined by the nature of things. The vastness and fertility of the land, the generous political institutions so fruitful of loyalty from the oppressed helped to make foreigners into loyal citizens. Concerning one of the races that helped to found the church a joke was current thirty years ago—"Children, what are the chief products of Ireland?"

"American citizens, ma'am."

Many Catholics from other lands, however, had to contend with the disturbing element of alien tongues, and a certain amount of propaganda carried on by their own Governments abroad. These factors complicated the business of Americanizing them. The Cahensly movement was started to provide foreign groups with their own special bishops and clergy. Possibly chancelleries of Europe were at the back of this idea, but most of its propagandists in this country were influenced by the desire to look after the spiritual welfare of foreign speaking Catholics who arrived on our shores ignorant of the prevailing language. Cardinal Gibbons and other farseeing prelates saw that this would mean the setting up of foreign Catholic groups within

the United States, nests of disturbance to national and to Catholic unity. It would have been a woeful thing for church and for country if when we had to take our place in the war in which almost all the nations of the world had taken sides the Catholic church in this country should find itself divided into racial groups with their own leaders. From this danger we were saved by the foresight and determination of Cardinal Gibbons and the other leaders of the church of thirty years ago.

This point is of so much importance that the reviewer quotes certain sentences in Mr. Will's estimate of it:

In his opinion, no union of Church and State in America was practicable or even desirable. With each supreme in its own sphere, he believed that the Church would receive here, in reality, the most powerful protection accorded her anywhere in the world. . . . He wished the Church in America to be as American as the Constitution itself, spurning interference in political affairs and pursuing her spiritual mission with serenity in the full confidence of vindication by the public judgment.

He was determined that the Church in this country should continue homogeneous, like the nation. If the discord of rival nationalist aims were definitely introduced, his work would go down in wreck.

One of the staunchest convictions to which he adhered throughout his life was that homogeneity in America was a fundamental need in the absence of a repressive government which might maintain unity by force.

III.

Cardinal Gibbons was always a prudent leader and the judgments that he expressed were always maturely considered before he gave voice to them. On a number of questions his mind, however, was definitely fixed and his expression vigorous and strong. He revered the Constitution of the United States almost as if it were an inspired document. He had a very firm conviction that the conditions in this country of freedom of religious worship without any union of church and State was entirely for the best interests of the church. He was a great defender of law and order; he was opposed to communism, but took his stand in the very memorable letter to Cardinal Simeoni in favor of the right of labor to organize. He had many friends of wealth and of high position, but he delighted in laboring to keep the Catholic Church of America the church of the people, which it certainly is. He was an advocate of education, and the Catholic University of America is a monument to his zeal. He opposed the prohibition amendment, although an apostle of total abstinence all his life, because he felt that the prohibition amendment would cause more trouble than it could heal.

In his efforts to produce a new social and political alignment for the Catholic Church in the United States and in the world he was particularly fortunate in having as his superior a Pope as broad-minded as Leo XIII., one of the greatest men of his century and certainly one of the greatest old men of all times. Says Mr. Will: "With a less sympathetic pontiff the work of Gibbons would have been impossible, and Leo did not hesitate to say again and again that the encouragement and active help which he received from the Archbishop of Baltimore formed one of the potent influences that sustained him amid the hostile misunderstanding with which he was often beset."

IV.

Of the achievements of the Cardinal's later days there is one on which his biographer has laid too little stress, although it was a great compliment paid to him by his brothers in the episcopate. Perhaps his own modesty did not permit him to say it or did not permit him to let Mr. Will say it. But the establishment of the National Catholic Welfare Council and the regular meeting of the Bishops were an outcome of the conviction that with the Cardinal gone there would be no individual churchman who could voice the soul of the church in America and that safety and prudence must lie henceforth in corporate judgments. This was the greatest com-

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